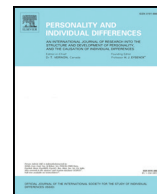




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The relationship between approval-based contingent self-esteem and conformity is influenced by sex and task difficulty

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ABSTRACT

Individuals are often faced with the pressure to alter their behaviors or attitudes in order to conform. Researchers have used self-esteem level to explain such conformity but have failed to account for other aspects of self-esteem. The present study examined how approval-based contingent self-esteem (i.e., basing feelings of self-worth on the approval of others) moderates the association between self-esteem level and the tendency to conform. Participants ($N = 126$) reported their self-esteem level and approval-based contingent self-esteem before completing an online conformity task that varied in difficulty. The results of the study showed that approval-based contingent self-esteem and sex moderated the association between self-esteem level and conformity in ways that were not always predicted. For example, men with approval-based contingent high self-esteem conformed more often on moderately difficult items than men who possessed non-contingent high self-esteem. These results suggest the possibility that different motivations may underlie the tendency to conform as task difficulty changes.

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“Well, I try my best to be just like I am but everybody wants you to be just like them.”

– Bob Dylan (*Maggie's Farm*).

Conformity refers to behavioral changes that are intended to match or imitate the behaviors or beliefs of members of the social environment (Cialdini & Trost, 1998). A large body of research has demonstrated that conformity is pervasive and may play a role in children playing with toys that are deemed popular, adolescents using illegal substances that are enjoyed by their peers, or adults buying houses they cannot really afford in order to ‘keep up with the Joneses’ (see Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004, for a review). A classic series of studies concerning conformity were conducted by Asch (1951, 1956) in which participants were shown line segments and asked to make judgments about the relative lengths of these segments (i.e., which of these three comparison lines is most similar to the standard line?). Despite the simplicity of the task, participants frequently gave obviously incorrect answers when they witnessed their peers providing the same incorrect answers.

A variety of motivations have been suggested for conformity but the primary motives seem to be the desire to be liked by others and the desire to be correct (e.g., Insko, 1985). Given that these motivations are connected with feelings of self-worth, it is not particularly surprising that various studies have shown self-esteem level to be linked with the likelihood of conforming to the attitudes and behaviors of other individuals (e.g., Arndt, Schimel, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2002;

Costanzo, 1970). More specifically, these studies have often shown that individuals with low levels of self-esteem are more likely to conform than are individuals who possess high levels of self-esteem. One explanation for this pattern is that conformity may serve as a form of psychological defense that is used to protect individuals from the negative evaluations of others that may accompany deviations from group norms (e.g., Cohen, 1959; Janis & Field, 1956; Silverman, 1964). Conforming to the attitudes and behaviors of others can improve how individuals feel about themselves which may explain why individuals with low versus high levels of self-esteem are more susceptible to various forms of social influence (e.g., Cohen, 1959).

Although a negative linear association has often emerged between self-esteem level and conformity, some studies have found a curvilinear relationship (Cox & Bauer, 1964; Gergen & Bauer, 1967; Nisbett & Gordon, 1967; Silverman, 1964). To further complicate this issue, the nature of this curvilinear relationship has differed between studies such that individuals who possessed moderate levels of self-esteem have been the most (Cox & Bauer, 1964; Gergen & Bauer, 1967; Nisbett & Gordon, 1967) and the least likely to conform (Silverman, 1964). A variety of explanations have been offered for these disparate results (e.g., the sex ratios of the samples, task difficulty) but none have been particularly compelling. One possibility is that these contradictory results may be explained by moderators influencing the association between self-esteem level and conformity (see Arndt et al., 2002 for a similar argument).

Other aspects of self-esteem – such as *contingent self-esteem* – may serve as vulnerability factors that moderate the association between self-esteem level and various outcomes (Jordan & Zeigler-Hill, 2013).

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Contingent self-esteem reflects the extent to which feelings of self-worth are reliant upon meeting standards or goals in a particular domain of life (Crocker & Wolf, 2001). Essentially, contingent self-esteem refers to meeting the goals and standards an individual believes he or she must achieve in order to have value and worth as a person. For example, individuals with contingent self-esteem may base their feelings of self-worth on the approval of others which will be the focus of the present research. Individuals with high levels of approval-based contingent self-esteem may feel good about themselves when they are invited to lunch by their coworkers, but may feel bad about themselves when they are not included in a night out with friends.

Accounting for contingent self-esteem allows researchers to distinguish between the different forms of self-esteem that exist (see Jordan & Zeigler-Hill, 2013 for a review). For example, high self-esteem is considered to be a heterogeneous construct consisting of both a secure form (captured by non-contingent high self-esteem) and a fragile form (captured by contingent high self-esteem). Contingent high self-esteem is considered to be a form of fragile high self-esteem because individuals who possess contingent high self-esteem feel good about themselves only when they meet their desired standards (e.g., being liked by others, doing well in school). To maintain positive feelings of self-worth, individuals with contingent high self-esteem pursue strategies they believe will help them meet their goals. For example, students who base their feelings of self-worth on academic competence tend to spend more time studying (Crocker, Karpinski, Quinn, & Chase, 2003). It is important to note that individuals with contingent self-esteem experience stronger reactions following failures that are relevant to the domain upon which their feelings of self-esteem are based. For example, students who base their self-esteem on their academic competence experienced relatively large decreases in self-esteem after receiving poor grades compared to other students (Crocker, Karpinski, et al., 2003). Accounting for the interaction between self-esteem level and approval-based contingent self-esteem may provide greater insight into the connection between feelings of self-worth and conformity.

1. Overview and predictions

Inconsistencies concerning the link between self-esteem and conformity may be due to the singular focus of previous studies on the association that self-esteem level has with conformity. The purpose of the present study was to examine whether approval-based contingent self-esteem moderated the association between self-esteem level and conformity. We focused on the facet of contingent self-esteem concerned with the approval of others because of its intuitive connection with conformity. We expected that individuals with approval-based contingent high self-esteem would conform more often than those who possess non-contingent high self-esteem in order to receive the approval of those in their immediate social environment. We included a quadratic term in our analyses to capture the sort of curvilinear association that has emerged from previous studies (e.g., Cox & Bauer, 1964). Due to inconsistencies concerning the curvilinear association between self-esteem level and conformity, no specific predictions were made.

We expected individuals with low levels of self-esteem to engage in relatively high rates of conformity – similar to the conformity rates found among individuals with approval-based contingent high self-esteem – regardless of whether their feelings of self-worth were contingent or non-contingent. The rationale for this prediction was based on the idea that individuals with low self-esteem may conform to the attitudes and behaviors of others because they are concerned about how others will evaluate them along with their doubts about the correctness of their own attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Cohen, 1959; Janis & Field, 1956; Silverman, 1964). Further, this prediction is consistent with sociometer theory (e.g., Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995), which argues that the function of self-esteem is to help individuals monitor their relational value. Low self-esteem indicates that one's social standing is relatively poor which may motivate

individuals to conform to the behaviors of others because this may potentially maintain or enhance their relational value (Leary & MacDonald, 2003).

Sex has been found to play a role in previous studies concerning conformity (e.g., Cox & Bauer, 1964). For example, Griskevicius, Goldstein, Mortensen, Cialdini, and Kenrick (2006) found that women were more likely to conform to the preferences of others when pursuing a romantic goal. In contrast, men were less likely to conform in these situations if they thought non-conformity made them unique and would help them stand out to a potential mate. Given the role of sex in previous studies, we examined whether sex further moderated the connection between self-esteem and conformity. The results of previous studies that considered the role that sex may play in the association between self-esteem level and conformity have been inconsistent so we did not have any clear predictions concerning sex. Rather, we included sex as a potential moderator for exploratory purposes. We also manipulated the difficulty of the task we used when measuring conformity. However, the results of previous studies concerning the link between task difficulty and conformity have also been inconsistent, with some studies revealing a simple linear association between conformity and difficulty (i.e., conformity rates increased as the difficulty of the task increased; Baron et al., 1996), whereas other studies found a curvilinear pattern such that the highest rates of conformity were observed for moderately difficult tasks (Gergen & Bauer, 1967). As with sex, we did not have a clear prediction concerning the role that task difficulty would play in the association between self-esteem and conformity but we included it for exploratory purposes.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and materials

Participants were 135 community members (73 men, 58 women, 4 undefined) recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk). Participants completed questionnaires concerning self-esteem level and approval-based contingent self-esteem – along with other questionnaires that are not relevant to the present study (e.g., basic personality dimensions) – via a secure website. Following the questionnaires, participants completed an online variation of the classic Asch conformity paradigm (1951, 1956). To determine the level of suspicion, a funneled debriefing was completed (e.g., "Did you ever have a sense that there was more to this study than we were telling you? If so, what made you think that?"). Five individuals who were suspicious about the true purpose of the study were excluded along with four other individuals who did not indicate their sex. The final sample consisted of 126 participants (71 men, 55 women) who had a mean age of 35.91 years ($SD = 11.81$) and a racial/ethnic composition of 76% White, 9% Black, 6% Hispanic, and 5% Asian, and 4% other.

3. Procedure

The procedure for this study was based on the paradigm developed by Asch (1951, 1956). Our cover story involved telling participants that the purpose of the study was to examine how different forms of technology impact communication among groups. Participants were told that they were randomly assigned to the online computer communication task, whereas other participants would be completing the same task in a face-to-face condition. The cover story provided the justification for participants to interact with six other ostensible participants during the online session. The other participants were actually confederates who had been previously recorded in order to appear as though they were providing live responses throughout the session.

Instructions indicated that the task was to identify which of eight options best completed the patterns from the Raven's Advanced Progressive Matrices (Raven, 1936). An example item is presented in Fig. 1. Participants were informed that they would be answering in a specific

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